

**FACILITATOR GUIDE: The Assertion Jar****GRADE: 9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup>****CONCEPTS & SKILLS**

- Demonstrate respectful behavior to group member ideas and opinions
- Manage and resolve conflict when appropriate

**MATERIALS & RESOURCES:**

- Large glass jar or plastic container, such as a pickle jar.
- Scissors and paper for students.
- Teaching Tolerance website- <http://www.tolerance.org/>, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center (This lesson adapted from Teaching Tolerance)

**PRESENTATION:**

Before introducing to the students, read the information included with this lesson. Then begin a dialogue about how people have different points of view and how people come to compromise when their views differ. Some people seem to be more skillful than others. What skills are required to express yourself effectively? Students will produce assertions on slips of paper and “stock” the classroom Assertion Jar. As a daily or occasional activity, students practice refutation skills by pulling an assertion from the jar and refuting it either orally or in writing. Appropriate as a writing prompt or journal activity.

**DIRECTIONS:**

1. Begin the exercise by reviewing **ARE argument construction** and **Four-Step Refutation** with the class. (Included in this lesson)
2. Ask each student to take out paper and pencil. Explain that they will be helping to stock the classroom “Assertion Jar.” Tell them that they should try to come up with 5-10 (depending on age and skill level) assertions that will be approved and cut up into folded slips to be placed in the jar.
3. Tell students that they will be asked to draw randomly from the jar on a regular basis for refutation practice, so it is not in their interest to produce assertions that are too difficult to refute (“The sky is blue,” for example).

4. Give students 5-10 minutes to write out their assertions. Review them before giving permission to cut up for placement in the jar.
5. When you review the assertions, don't use too heavy of a hand on spelling and grammar; this is to be a fun exercise. Do suggest corrections when the assertion is illegible or incoherent, and encourage students to rewrite when appropriate.
6. Pass the stocked jar around and ask each student to draw out an assertion.
7. Ask students to take a minute to write out their Four-Step Refutation, and then go around the class while students stand and present their refutations.
8. **Optional Follow-on Activities**
9. If you use journals in the classroom, refutation practice makes a good daily journal entry, especially as a classroom routine so that students know to draw an assertion out of the jar on the way into the classroom. It's a nice change from the shared daily writing prompt, and students enjoy the participatory aspect of the jar. Don't forget to re-stock the jar when it's empty!

**TIME:**

**20-30 minutes**

## **An Argument for Democracy**

Democratic societies thrive on dissent, discussion and debate. Too often, however, our society provides poor role models for children (and adults) trying to learn the skills to be effective, active and responsible participants in that democratic society. On FOX News, for example, children learn that people interrupt, talk over and insult each other when they debate issues. Flip the dial to C-SPAN, and these same children learn that “debate” is scripted and un-engaging.

Young children experiment with having and voicing opinions. These are usually opinions they have overheard at home or in their communities. Public schools have the potential to expose children to multiple and diverse perspectives on a variety of issues, enriching their social and personal lives while planting the seeds for an enlivened democratic society.

Most states include speaking and listening skills as part of mandated content standards. Speaking and listening skills, however, are difficult to test, especially in a standardized and statewide manner. As a consequence, these essential skills are too often ignored at great cost to students and society.

These lessons provide a way for basic argument literacy to be integrated into any classroom. Students of all ages, backgrounds and skill levels are able to learn the basic tools for argumentation. Once they learn these tools, it becomes easier to build discussion and deliberation into daily classroom activities. Many students also find that practice in structured argument dramatically improves their ability to read and produce persuasive writing.

This chapter introduces the two most basic skills (Meany and Shuster, 2002) in the persuasive communication toolbox:

Students will learn to turn their opinions into arguments using the ARE method of argument construction; and

Students will learn how to engage the arguments of others using a process called Four-Step Refutation.

These two tools, combined with the ideas discussed in Chapter 1, will lay the groundwork for productive, reasoned and lively discussions on a variety of topics. They also will give students “training wheels” for learning how to have reasoned arguments outside the classroom.

## Ground Rules

In any class for any discussion it can be helpful to have ground rules in place. Such rules usually work best when they are generated and agreed up by the participants themselves. Under the umbrella of civil discourse, these rules might be approach as a classroom constitution of sorts – guidelines that govern their classroom discussions. After these civil discourse lessons have been completed (or at key points during the process) it might be good to revisit the ground rules to see if there are any amendments to be considered. (See [Chapter 3](#) for more on ground rules.)

## The Parts of An Argument

Everybody has opinions about the world. Sometimes these opinions are about very basic and personal preferences, such as what flavor of ice cream is the best, or whether cats or dogs make the better pet. Other opinions are about local, regional, national or international issues. When we vote for a candidate in an election, we are expressing an opinion about who is the best person to hold an office – or, in some cases, who should *not* hold office.

One of the major tasks of education is to teach students how to form and support their opinions. Writing instruction offers the “five-paragraph essay” to encourage students to begin to formalize their ideas using the tools of thesis and support. In science and math, students learn to advance theories that can be proven or disproven. English teachers lead discussions about poems or stories where students might have multiple, differing interpretations of the work. All of these exercises teach students to form, shape and defend arguments.

There is a difference between an opinion and an argument. An opinion is an expression of preference; it does not require any support (although it is stronger *with* support). An opinion is only the first part of an argument.

## Three Parts of an Argument

**A- Assertion**

**R- Reasoning**

**E- Evidence**

To be complete, arguments should have three parts: an assertion, reasoning and evidence (easily remembered with the mnemonic ARE).

An **assertion** is usually a simple statement, such as “Homework is a waste of time,” “Television news is boring,” or “Tomato soup is better than grilled cheese sandwiches.” An assertion is the thesis statement or the main point of an argument.

**Reasoning** is the “because” part of an argument, as in the following examples:

1. “Homework is a waste of time because it takes time away from other activities that are more important.”
2. “Television news is boring because it doesn’t talk about issues that are relevant to me.”
3. “Tomato soup is better than a grilled cheese sandwich because it is more nutritious.”

Reasoning can be simple or complex, but when working with students who are new to this process, the most important things to emphasize are the use of the word “because” as a cue and the need to connect the statement and the reasoning. Some reasoning will always be better than others, but for beginning students it is useful to focus on the basic skill of linking reasoning to an assertion rather than critiquing the validity of the reasoning right away.

Just as reasoning supports an assertion, **evidence** supports reasoning. There are many different kinds of evidence, ranging from expert testimony or statistics to historical or contemporary examples. As students learn the ARE framework for argumentation, it is helpful to encourage them to begin with the most basic and common form of evidence: the example. This also allows students to practice the verbal cue “for example.”

- “Homework is a waste of time because it takes time away from other activities that are more important. For example, we end up doing worksheets of math problems instead of getting outside and getting fresh air and exercise.”
- “Television news is boring because it doesn’t talk about issues that are relevant to me. For example, I never see stories about the issues that kids deal with every day.”
- “Tomato soup is better than a grilled cheese sandwich because it is more nutritious. For example, tomato soup contains important vitamins such as lycopene, while grilled cheese sandwiches really don’t have that much nutritional value at all.”

Teaching students the importance of evidence isn’t easy in a culture that doesn’t prioritize evidence. From influential ideas circulated on television and in news magazines to letters to the editor in smaller newspapers, evidence is in short supply. Many arguments rely on appeals to emotion rather than evidence; others simply assume that reasoning will speak for itself and there is no need for evidence.

By working to overcome that societal deficit, we also find ways to combat stereotypical beliefs. When students learn to prioritize and critically investigate the evidence for ideas, they are more likely to question stereotypes and engage in

arguments based on the content of the arguments themselves rather than the character and nature of people advancing the arguments. Students learn to focus their discussion on facts rather than emotions, acquiring important skills for civil disagreement at the same time that they are building critical thinking and reasoning skills.

Here we are focusing solely on introducing the need to have evidence. This obviously sets aside the question of the quality of evidence, the source of evidence and other questions of validity. As students practice disagreement, debate and discussion, they also can be taught not just to include evidence in their arguments, but to make sure the evidence they use is solid and reliable.

### **Four-Step Refutation**

**Step 1: Restate (“They say...”)**

**Step 2: Refute (“But...”)**

**Step 3: Support (“Because...”)**

**Step 4: Conclude (“Therefore....”)**

**Step 1: Restate.** The first part of refutation is for a student to restate the argument being challenged. Students should concisely and fairly summarize the opposing argument; the cue “They say...” (or “Some say...” or “Mary said...”) is helpful. Discourage students from using the second person (“You say...”) when restating arguments to avoid becoming too personal. Explain also that students do not need to restate in detail the argument they’d like to refute; a summary is fine. This has the added benefit of helping students practice summarization, a skill that is at the heart of critical thinking.

Speaker 1: “School should be year round.”

Speaker 2: “Speaker one says that school should be year round.”

**Step 2: Refute.** Here, students state their objection to a point in a simple sentence. It’s helpful to encourage students to use the verbal cue “but....” For younger students, it is sometimes helpful to use the cue “But I disagree...” for simple disagreement. This second step functions as a kind of thesis statement for the counter argument, as shown by this example:

4.Speaker 1: “School should be year round.”

5.Speaker 2: “Speaker one says that school should be year round, but school should last for only nine months.”

**Step 3: Support.** This part of refutation parallels the “RE” (reasoning and evidence) in ARE. Using the verbal cue “because,” students will try to provide examples to support their reasoning:

- Speaker 1: “School should be year round.”
- Speaker 2: “Speaker one says that school should be year round, but school should last for only nine months, because students need time off to do other things like play sports and go on family vacations.”

**Step 4: Conclude.** Students should attempt to wrap up their refutations with a comparison, a contrast or some kind of statement that demonstrates their ability to resolve two opposing ideas. The verbal cue “therefore” in this part of the process helps students approach the argument logically. Beginners at this process are likely to simply restate their main point; that’s very similar to the approach we see in young writers trying to learn how to write effective conclusions to short essays or paragraphs. As students become more adept, they learn how to use “therefore” more effectively in disagreements.

- Speaker 1: “School should be year round.”

Speaker 2: “Speaker one says that school should be year round, but school should last for only nine months, because students need time off to do other things like play sports and go on family vacations. Therefore, year-round school is bad for students.”